Hillel Engagement Practices in COVID
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**Executive Summary**

After nearly a year of disruption to campus life due to COVID-19, Hillels have adapted their approaches to engaging students. This fall, we set out to understand the practices that were serving Hillels particularly well. We focused the research on those Hillels whose data suggested that they were achieving similar rates, and allowing them to grow, maintain or only slightly decrease “depth” engagement, and those with relatively lower decreases in “breadth” engagement. Below is a summary of key findings. The full report describes them in detail and cites numerous examples from Hillels across the United States.

**Practice 1: Strategic Collection and Use of Data for Learning and Relationship Building**

More than ever, it has been important for Hillels to be attuned to students’ needs and experiences.

Successful Hillels frequently used surveys, focus groups and one-on-one meetings to gather data to inform their work. These practices not only provided valuable points of data to inform Hillels’ activities, but also served as a meaningful point of connection to help students feel heard and connected to Hillel.

Social media has also proven to be a valuable source of data for campuses. Paying attention to student engagement on social media can give professionals a baseline understanding of who students are and what they care about.

**Practice 2: Prioritize Deep Small Group Engagement and Use “Breadth Programming” Strategically**

Generally Hillels are finding that offering recurring, cohort-based programs are resonating deeply with students. These cohort experiences build community among students, and provide regular touch points of connection in a highly isolating time.

While many Hillels utilized the Jewish Learning Fellowship for this purpose, additional models enabled Hillels to expand the methodology, and offer a variety of customized fellowships with topics relevant to students’ lives.

Some Hillels used cohort based experiences with student leaders as well, investing in them deeply to “keep the bench warm” for the year ahead and enlisting them to reach out to students.

While Hillels have largely struggled in COVID times with one-time programs that many Hillels offer in normal times, these programs were most successful when they built off pre-existing relationships among students and when they featured high profile speakers.

**Practice 3: Strategically Connect with New Students**

Successful Hillels have a comprehensive plan for meeting new students that includes list gathering, one-to-one outreach, and use of social media to build brand awareness and identify new students.

These Hillels also designed specific programs tailored to first-year students or build “pods” to help them connect to peers and to Hillel.

Additionally, Hillels used their databases to guide strategic outreach to students. For example, some made it a priority to reach out to every student who had been engaged in Hillel pre-pandemic, and to pay particular attention to students who were not engaging at all this year.

**Practice 4: Distribute Packages and Swag to Create Moments of Connection and Tools for Further Engagement with Students.**

While many Hillels are prioritizing swag, food deliveries or other give-aways this year, interviews revealed that used strategically the kits served a variety of purposes. They offered surprise and delight (what would be inside!?) and an opportunity for connection with peers and Hillel staff (an “event” in an otherwise isolated existence). They met practical needs of students (holiday candles, ear plugs), and were often filled with resources to be used either online in a follow up gathering, or with one’s pod. Some Hillels also noted the significance of the package distribution for student wellness check-ins.

**Practice 5: Re-Imagine Shabbat**

With traditional Shabbat dinners and services that Hillels are known for cancelled, Hillels have developed Shabbat strategies that create physical and virtual points of connection to help students feel seen, connected and celebrated. Many Hillels interviewed created activities that students can do outside, in pods, or on their own but connected to the larger community. And, related to the swag practices, distributing meals or Shabbat ritual kits have been a critical tool.
Background

The COVID-19 pandemic forced institutions and leaders of all kinds to significantly change how they do their work in an era of social distancing. Jewish organizations, including Hillels, were not spared from this tumult.

Still, in the face of these challenges, anecdotal evidence suggests that Hillels have been successful in engaging college students and responding to their needs: transposing programming, religious services, and classes online; gathering in safe, socially-distanced ways; and distributing “Shabbat boxes” and other kinds of self-care materials to students.

While these efforts across all Hillels are admirable, the pandemic is associated with a notable decline in the number of students participating in Hillel activities. This study seeks to understand in a more systematic way the activities, approaches, and strategies at Hillels that have experienced relatively smaller declines, or even growth, in participation during the Fall 2020 Covid semester. It not only describes what successful Hillel professionals did to engage students during the pandemic, but also what those strategies and approaches accomplished for students. Its goal is to identify actionable and replicable approaches, so other Hillels can use or adapt them in the Spring 2021 semester and beyond.

An initial analysis identified five major themes across Hillels:

1. Strategic collection and use of data
2. A focus on depth and cohort based experiences,
3. Key strategies to connect with a wider group of new students
4. Strategic use of swag and give-aways, and
5. The reimagining of Shabbat.

Of note, across all conversations and true for how each of the themes was enacted by the Hillels, was a strong awareness of the mental health challenges of isolation and a commitment by the Hillels to address student wellness needs.

Lastly, Hillel professionals also talked about how they supported students living at home and how they worked together remotely as a staff team. Shorter sections of this report describe those strategies.
Strategic Collection and Use of Data for Learning and Relationship Building

In the Fall 2020 term, it was more important than ever for Hillels to find out who their students were and what they actually needed. For example, early attempts at one-off Zoom events attracted fewer participants than expected.

But successful Hillels during COVID learned about students in more ways than attendance at events. They conducted surveys and focus groups, met students one-on-one, and looked for patterns in social media engagement. These various data collection strategies both helped Hillels better serve their students and also enabled students to feel seen and heard in a high-stress time.

Surveys

During COVID, many of the Hillels in this study have been regularly conducting surveys to learn more about who students are and what they most need. Campuses included in this study have learned from surveys in a number of different ways.

These surveys have offered a snapshot of how students most want to engage with Hillel at different moments of the pandemic. Based on student responses to a Spring 2020 survey, University of Minnesota Hillel staff knew to prioritize one-on-one conversations with students to let them vent about the difficulties of the early months of COVID. Over the summer, Texas Hillel sent a student leadership-designed (but staff-approved) survey to their 250 most involved students. They learned that most of them would be returning to Austin, that they were nervous about feeling isolated in their apartments, and that they trusted Hillel to be a safe place. Since the Fall term ended, a number of campuses have sent out surveys to learn what worked best for students, and to adapt for the spring.

Surveys have helped campuses refine specific program offerings. For example, every week the University of Oregon asks all students who signed up for a Shabbat meal for feedback. From this feedback, they’ve added more options on their order-form and moved their distribution site from the Hillel building to a more central location on campus. At York College of Pennsylvania, weekly student surveys about their “Sha-bag” program helped Hillel staff know what students most wanted to receive. On one of those surveys, a new student shared that he wanted something that could show off he was proud to be Jewish. This feedback gave both a concrete idea for what to put in future bags— and new insight into what the program could accomplish.

Surveys have given permission to students to express themselves and to be heard during a high-stress time. Even when surveys are not conducted face-to-face, students are still choosing to share information about themselves. Though the moment of data collection does not build relationships in the same way as a focus group or a one-on-one meeting would, when Hillels act in response to the data they’ve collected, including in the ways described above, students feel like their time in responding is worthwhile and that Hillel genuinely cares about their wellness and wellbeing.

Focus Groups

Though focus groups cannot provide the same volume of data as surveys, they can provide more textured information about students’ experiences and can themselves be moments of community-building and leadership training, even as they inform future efforts.

Near the end of the Fall semester, Arizona State Hillel hosted a focus group of nine first-year students. Students shared about what experiences resonated most for them during the Fall 2020 semester. Yet the meeting itself also resonated with
students. By the end, they all shared Instagram and Snapchat information to be able to stay in touch with one another.

For ASU Hillel, some specific program ideas, like the creation of intentional ‘pods,’ came from this group. But an additional outcome was the desire to host more focus groups for other populations on campus, like Greek students and student leaders.

Cornell Hillel also conducted focus groups with their executive board and their Campus Engagement Interns (CEI). These groups helped Cornell Hillel prioritize small, distanced, in-person gatherings over hybrid and virtual events, and gave these students the responsibility to synthesize and act on what they were learning from their peers.

**One-on-One Meetings**

Throughout the Fall 2020 term, campus professionals and engagement interns continued to meet one-on-one with new and returning students alike. Instead of taking place in beloved campus coffee shops, they happened over Zoom, outside, or distanced with masks. All of the Hillels included in this study made efforts to invite every student they knew about to participate in a one-on-one meeting with a staff member or engagement intern.

Similarly to focus groups, these meetings enabled Hillels to learn about students’ wellness needs and experiences in a more textured way, helped facilitate relationship-building between students or between Hillel staff members and students, and made students feel like someone was listening to them.

According to Fall 2020 Jewish Learning Fellowship (JLF) survey data, the most common topics discussed in one-on-one sessions between JLF educators and students were general life check-ins, the pandemic, friends and campus life, and academic life. This finding suggests that students turn to Hillel educators to discuss both the novel situation of the pandemic along with the perennial concerns of college life.

The content of one-on-one engagement meetings also shifted during Fall 2020 due to the uncertainty around, and then the cancellation of, certain immersive programs, especially Birthright.

At the University of Oregon, engagements through Hillel used to be about “selling” various programs to students. Fairly or not, some students related to Hillel staff as “the people who are going to blast you with Birthright messaging.” Even before COVID-19, Oregon Hillel had changed its engagement strategy, with support from the Organizational Design Lab, to focus instead on three core questions about student needs and experience:

1. What are you passionate about?
2. Where do you spend your time?
3. What are you missing in your life?

A successful one-on-one engagement no longer meant a student signing up for a particular program, but rather a staff member or intern learning something important about a student’s life.

COVID-19 made asking these questions of students even more important. The cancellation of Brithright’s winter season took some of the pressure off of staff to meet recruitment quotas and allowed them to get to know students just for the sake of relationship building.

At Oregon, these foundational relationships are expected to make recruiting for Birthright and other immersive travel programs easier in the future, whether trips resume this summer or later. The Hillel staff has already built meaningful relationships with students and can recruit much more intentionally in the future.
Social Media Data

One additional way Hillels collected data during (and prior to) the pandemic was through social media, especially Instagram. Instagram allows users to download the list of accounts that viewed a particular ‘story’ for a 48-hour period. Though likes, comments, and story ‘views’ are not counted as engagements, Instagram data can inform future program offerings and how Hillel staff or engagement interns connect to students.

Depth Experiences Resonate

Hillel staff repeated in interviews that they experienced smaller declines in ‘depth’ (numbers of students participating in 6 or more Hillel activities or a high-impact experience) than in ‘breadth’ (numbers of students participating in between 1-5 Hillel activities). For some Hillels, the number of students in the ‘depth’ category actually increased from a typical year, even without travel opportunities.

The two main ways Hillels succeeded in ‘depth’ were by offering recurring, cohort-based programs and by empowering student leaders. One-time programs that are more common at Hillels in non-COVID times were less successful. The one-time programs that were most successful this year -- those more oriented around ‘breadth’-- either gave students an opportunity to hear from a big-name speaker or built off of pre-existing relationships among students or between students and staff.

Offer Recurring, Cohort-Based Programs

One of the most successful initiatives at the Hillels included in this sample, as well as at many other Hillels across the world, were cohort-based experiences. At Queens College, they “focused everything on cohort learning,” offering multiple JLF classes, a leadership cohort for Mizrahi students, and a fellowship in collaboration with Hunter College Hillel. This year, Minnesota Hillel doubled both the number of fellowships it offered and the number of participating students. Arizona State

Staff Productivity

Find opportunities for personal check-ins and spontaneous interactions

In addition to student surveys, Hillels sent staff surveys over the summer to determine how to best support staff during the pandemic. One shared theme was hearing that staff missed opportunities for casual interaction in the office.

Strategies for this kind of staff connection at Hillels included twice-weekly Zoom calls with no agenda, weekly 15-minute bonding activities over Zoom, a short, daily check-in, and more extended “schmoozes” every three weeks. All of these were attempts to best create the conditions for spontaneous interaction and creativity.

Choose the best online productivity and communication tools for your staff

Email and Zoom meetings, though common, were not always the most productive tool for communicating and keeping track of work. Some staff teams relied heavily on shared Google Docs for keeping track of projects; and on GChat, Whatsapp, and Discord (a free app with similar capabilities as Slack) for communication.

Adapt expectations for pandemic uncertainty

Hillels have responded to ever-changing pandemic circumstances by adapting staff schedules, planning timelines, and priorities. Giving staff flexible schedules and making sure they can take time for self- and family-care has been important during COVID.

Before COVID-19, Minnesota Hillel prided itself on being planners for the long-game, always looking ahead 6-10 weeks out in the calendar and knowing what would happen. Since the pandemic began, they now only plan 6-10 days ahead. Because weather, numbers of COVID cases, and staff availability are always in flux, they have to stay nimble and flexible as a team.

At Texas Hillel, when staff are unsure about what to do next, they are encouraged to think about what opportunities there are for “small beats” with students-- who are just five students they can text or call or send a note to about something? Those “small beat” interactions, they suspect, collectively have a larger impact than “big beat” events.
Hillel used all of its JLF grant money for the 2020-21 academic year in the Fall term alone because of the number of students who signed up to participate.

Cohorts, even when virtual (which most were), were successful for a few reasons. Being part of a cohort created accountability for students towards one another and towards their educators. They knew they would be missed if they did not join a Zoom call in a given week. Such accountability did not exist for one-time program offerings. Participating in a cohort with the same people every week also helped students feel connected to a Jewish community. The top reason both for signing up for, and then completing, JLF was to feel such community connection.

Cohort programs also forged relationships between students and educators. Most educators met one-on-one with JLF participants outside of formal class time, and students indicated that their educator was among the top reasons for returning to their cohort week after week.

Cohort-based programming was also successful because their content spoke to students’ lives and experiences. That could mean connecting JLF sessions on vulnerability or uncertainty to COVID-19. One student explained, “My favorite topic [in JLF] dealt with preparing for the future in the face of uncertainty...it has never been more applicable than during the COVID-19 pandemic. The discussion offered a bit of stress relief because I realized everyone was in the same boat.”

The content of cohort-based programming was appealing to students for reasons beyond the pandemic. Content could address specific student populations like first-year, Greek, or Mizrahi students. Based on data collection described in the first section of this report, Hillels offered new fellowship topics based on student interests, in areas like cooking, wellness, and even The Bachelor television franchise.

Some fellowships, including JLF, came with a small stipend for participation. While Hillel is still learning about the full impact of the JLF stipend, it did create additional accountability for students—they would not receive the stipend unless they attended most sessions. For some students, the stipends offered by cohort-based programming were critical to their recruitment and continued participation in the program.

As one student noted in the Fall 2020 JLF survey, “During a pandemic, you need to weigh your options, and often it is important to prioritize financial stability over community/spirituality. The stipend allowed me to justify the time I spent in JLF and if it was not for it, I would most likely have not done it.”

A practical finding about cohorts and fellowships from GW Hillel was that students who missed sign-up deadlines early in the semester were left out. For Spring 2021, the Hillel is adapting by offering shorter cohorts that do not begin until halfway through the semester.
Keep Student Leaders Engaged

Another successful ‘depth’ strategy for Hillels was keeping student leaders engaged. Some of the approaches for this kind of leadership engagement at different Hillels include encouraging involved students to find out what their peers not already connected to Hillel most want, convening focus groups of student leaders, empowering them to run special programs for Shabbat, pushing them to think beyond offering one-time programs and to break down silos between different student groups, giving them physical space in which to share their passions with the wider community, and offering fellowships and cohorts about leadership.

Different leadership models that continued or began during the pandemic at the Hillels in this study included engagement interns, student executive boards, heads of student groups, Shabbat ambassadors, leadership cohorts, and big-sib programs.

By placing this sort of focus on students who are already leaders, Hillel staff hope that they will be prepared to connect with a larger group of previously uninvolved students when pandemic restrictions loosen and it becomes easier for Hillel to make connections. At Minnesota Hillel, staff described this strategy as “keeping their bench warm.”

Investing time and resources in student leaders also helped campuses identify new students and learn about the experiences of students who had not already found a way to connect with Hillel, as student leaders were more likely to encounter peers than Hillel staff. Student leaders also brought creative energy to the ongoing reimagination of Hillel work, especially around Shabbat.

Successful ‘breadth’ programs

Campuses learned pretty quickly into the pandemic that non-recurring events on Zoom were poorly attended. Some exceptions were big-name speakers, like the Hillel-at-Home event last Spring featuring Brené Brown, or events based on students’ pre-existing personal relationships.

For example, Texas Hillel’s Israel fellow, who had spent considerable time building relationships with students through one-on-one encounters and small, distanced in-person programs, hosted a Zoom dialogue with an Israeli-Arab calling in from Israel that was well-attended. On Sukkot, Northeastern Hillel invited students to sign their name on stickers shaped like vegetables, and to stick them on the walls of the Sukkah. When students visited the Sukkah, either alone or in small groups, they experienced delight upon seeing their friends’ names and their sticker veggie of choice on the walls.

Binghamton Hillel managed to transpose one of their most popular annual events, Aroma (a recreation of the Israeli coffee chain) online. By encouraging students to attend together on Zoom in pods and by distributing chocolates and other supplies prior to the event, they had over 200 people register and even more participate. It was the largest student event of any kind at Binghamton during the Fall 2020 term.

Connecting with New Students

In the Fall 2020 term, most campuses cancelled in-person orientations, forbade organizations from tabling, and prohibited large gatherings, making traditional meet-and-greet programming impossible for Hillels. These types of programs, so important in the past for Hillel ‘breadth’ numbers, meant that almost all campuses, even those that saw an increase in ‘depth,’ saw decreases in breadth. They also connected with fewer first-year students by the end of the Fall term than they had in previous years. Still, even though it was much harder than in previous years, Hillels did not abandon efforts to get connected to and meet new students.
Students Living at Home

Most of the Hillels included in this study had a majority of students living in on-campus student housing or in off-campus apartments nearby. Three Hillels (Queens College, San Diego Hillel, and George Washington University Hillel) had higher proportions of students living at home with parents or other relatives in the Fall 2020 term. These were some of the strategies that staff experimented with this past term.

Fellowship participation even more important

While every campus in this study made efforts to recruit students for cohort-based programs, these were even more important for students living away from campus. According to the Fall 2020 JLF student survey, students living at home were more likely than students living on or near campus to say that they were motivated to complete JLF to feel less lonely during the pandemic.

During closing JLF sessions for first-year students living at home, they expressed how grateful they were for the opportunity to connect with one another and to feel like they would not be starting from the very beginning when they came to campus. They could also bring their family members to these closing sessions, allowing Hillel staff to get to know the student's whole context.

Virtual fellowships during COVID allowed Hillels to widen their reach, bringing in more students from previously underserved populations. For example, Hillel of San Diego recruited more students from two of their campuses with smaller Jewish student populations to participate in virtual fellowships.

Shipping packages home

For students living at home, receiving a package from Hillel in the mail can be a way for them to experience some loving attention from people who care about them outside of their immediate household.

At the beginning of the semester, Queens College Hillel shipped a care package to every first-year student. Upon receipt, a student shared with Hillel staff that it felt so good to be noticed by someone other than her parents during the pandemic. Queens College also met a practical need for students living at home with their families by shipping them earplugs.

For Hanukkah, GW Hillel also wanted to communicate to students that they were seen, while also not being wasteful. Rather than shipping a Hanukkiah to students who were unlikely to need one, they shipped a candle that simply said, “We love you a latke” to convey the message that Hillel was there for them.

Experimentation with engagement interns on the neighborhood level

Since the pandemic started, Queens College Hillel has launched a new engagement internship based on neighborhoods. Interns have been assigned a particular neighborhood in Queens and conduct engagement activities with other students who live there. Right now, the program is mostly virtual, but they hope to maintain it even after the pandemic and see what can be learned from bringing Hillel to where students live, rather than expecting students to come to the physical Hillel space on campus.

To do this work well, Hillels had a comprehensive plan for new student engagement, used social media strategically, reserved special opportunities for new students, organized students into pods, and distributed packages, swag, and gifts to students. These strategies introduced Hillel to new students as a resource for their Jewish journeys and overall well being.

Have a comprehensive plan

A number of Hillels included in this study had deliberate and systematic plans for reaching out to new students. Many of these campuses had such plans in place in previous years, but these became even more important during COVID when tabling was not allowed on most campuses.

The most common strategy was going down the list of new students one-by-one and attempting to reach out to all of them. In previous years, such outreach efforts were sometimes rebuffed, but this year, some campuses reported that a higher proportion of students were happy to hear from a Hillel staff member or engagement intern. Even if they did not end up participating in Hillel events, they had someone to contact if they needed something. Some Hillels tried to have more than one engagement with students on their lists, aiming for at least three touch-points in the first six weeks.

Obtaining such lists, as in most years, continued to be a challenge. While some Hillels got lists of Jewish students from their administrations, others had to be more creative. The two main strategies were using social media and tapping into the social networks of previously involved students.
At Hillel of San Diego, staff joined Facebook groups for first-year students and their parents to gather contact information, and advertised Hillel events on the virtual student union site. At the University of Oregon, an initial list of Jewish first-year students was obtained by posting a Hillel survey link in the Class of 2024 Facebook Group. At Texas Hillel, staff relied on returning students’ BBYO and summer camp connections to identify incoming students. Staff attempted to contact as many of the students on their lists as possible.

On most of these campuses, lists of first-year students expanded organically, when people on the list would ask if their friend could also get a Shabbat meal from Hillel, as students invited friends to participate in Hillel programming, or when more people interacted with Hillel content on social media.

Many Hillels also systematically contacted veteran and returning students in the Spring and Fall semesters to check in and to ask what they needed. For example, in April 2020 Cornell Hillel staff reached out to over 2000 Jewish students. Not all of these contacts resulted in a deep connection with Hillel, but through this process Hillel staff learned about students who needed more intensive pastoral care and support, and provided that to them.

Use social media strategically

Hillels used social media not only to identify students and collect information about them, but also to connect and interact with them. Students “live on Instagram” according to one campus professional, so meeting them there was an important engagement strategy.

Some specific social media strategies used at the Hillels in this study include profiling a different student every day on a Hillel staffer’s Instagram account, sharing videos of Hillel staff and student leaders introducing themselves, using social media templates from Hillel International to advertise programming, finding ways to connect physical and virtual spaces by putting up posters with QR codes advertising various Hillel offerings at Shabbat or holiday food distributions, making interactive Instagram stories with questions and sliders, and asking permission for official Hillel accounts to ‘follow’ students.

Beyond Instagram, Hillels have built Whatsapp groups to facilitate lively conversations and connections among students.

Set aside particular roles or in-person opportunities for first-year students

Hillels that were allowed to meet with small groups of students in-person still had to limit attendance. Typically, these Hillels prioritized first-year and transfer students, recognizing that they likely needed more social support to build friendships and community as newcomers to campus. For example, Texas Hillel prioritized use of their outdoor patio space for first-year students, both for a learning fellowship and for Shabbat meals. Other students, after picking up their meals at Hillel, had to go elsewhere.

Even for those Hillels hosting minimal in-person events, special opportunities were still reserved for first-year students. For the first time ever, Pitt Hillel offered a JLF cohort for first-year students only. The Aroma program at Binghamton Hillel, described in the previous section, typically invites first-year students to plan and lead it. Those leadership roles continued as first-year students were charged to reimagine the program over Zoom. Some Hillels also created surveys and convened focus groups specifically geared towards first-year students.

Organize students into pods

An opportunity that worked well for both returning and first-year students was being organized into a smaller ‘pod.’ Being placed in a ‘pod’ introduced students to a smaller group of people with whom they could do some in-person activities. At North Texas Hillel in Dallas, staff and engagement interns divided new
students into seven “fams” of ten students each. “Fams” could get reimbursed for grabbing food and having a meal together.

Buffalo Hillel’s pod program was cleverly named “Herd Community.” The program was open to all students, not just first-years. It developed in response to feedback from students that they were experiencing a tension between having a social experience in college and following pandemic safety rules. They ‘gamified’ the pod experience by giving out points to different herds based on completion of various individual and group wellness challenges. Herds could exchange points for prizes that also prioritized wellness, like water bottles and blenders for smoothies.

Based on encouraging feedback from the Fall, Buffalo Hillel will run this “Herd Community” program again. Being in a “Herd” not only helped relieve student stress by teaching them new wellness techniques in the individual challenges, but also by providing them opportunities for social interaction that they would not otherwise have had.

Another way campuses took advantage of the pod model was by inviting students to participate in Hillel events with their pods, such as a Shabbat meal together or joining a Zoom event as a group. This approach could make a large event on Zoom feel a little more personal and intimate.

**Distribute packages, swag, and gifts**

Many Hillels distributed items to students during the pandemic in the form of bags or kits. Some were connected to specific crafting or cooking programs, others to holidays and Shabbat. These bags accomplished a number of different goals for students and for Hillel. For example, York College of Pennsylvania learned from a survey administered to all York College students that the most desired student activities during the pandemic were those that involved physical objects, and the opportunity for a group to interact with the same set of objects together on Zoom. In response, they created a weekly “Shabag” program containing various craft items that students could make together on a Hillel Zoom program from the comfort of their own home.

But the “Shabag” program accomplished more than just meeting a student need. The bags created a moment of surprise and delight each week, when students discovered what was in the bag. During a bleak semester, the importance of creating small moments of joy cannot be understated. The bags could also be used to pick up food from the dining hall, meeting a practical need. Because the bags had Hillel’s name on them, they also helped build up Hillel’s brand on campus.
The Reimagining of Shabbat

At many Hillels, the marquee event each week in pre-COVID times had been a large, in-person, communal Shabbat dinner in the Hillel building or some other space. The pandemic forced all Hillels to completely reimagine Shabbat. While being forced to make dramatic changes could be a pain point, a number of Hillels in this study learned that the old way they were hosting Shabbat had some limitations. On some of these campuses, letting go of old habits helped campuses reach new student and non-student populations alike. Hillel professionals are already predicting that some of these innovations will live on past the pandemic.

Reimagining Shabbat uncovered new opportunities for Hillels

In Fall 2020, on some campuses, more students took part in Hillel’s Shabbat offerings than they had in previous terms. One explanation for this increase was that students who may have felt anxious or self-conscious attending the large Shabbat events in prior years felt more comfortable in smaller, quieter spaces. Another explanation is that with so little happening on campus for students this fall, Shabbat represented a valuable way to be social and connect with peers.

At the University of Oregon, for example, students referred friends and roommates who had never been to a Shabbat dinner before to order food. Because of their data collection strategies described above, they not only got contact information for these students and their families, but also learned to distribute Shabbat food closer to the center of campus, opportunities they would not have had were it not for COVID adaptations.

Other campuses relied on student leaders to come up with creative ways to celebrate Shabbat as a Hillel community outdoors. Eleven “Shabbat Ambassadors” at Minnesota Hillel met with staff every week to determine what the plan for Shabbat would be. These included having a food truck in the parking lot, candle lighting on the front patio, and distributing gift cards for students to pick up meals for themselves in the nearby neighborhood. While staff acknowledged that they could not provide a “full” Shabbat experience this past semester, students did express gratitude for these small opportunities to come together in person.

Engagement Interns at Texas Hillel also got creative with outdoor Shabbat offerings in Fall 2020, hosting a stand-up paddleboard Shabbat on a nearby lake and convening a group of students for a Shabbat hike. These events got great feedback from students who participated.

At Hillel of San Diego, a higher proportion of students than most of the other campuses in this study lived at home with their parents or other relatives. Recognizing the opportunity to connect with students in the context of their family lives, Hillel of San Diego hosted a few Unity Shabbat weekends for students and families from all the campuses they serve over the course of the Fall term that paired Shabbat observance with a shared cooking or baking activity students could do with their families, using supplies distributed in boxes by Hillel. Including these non-traditional audiences on Shabbat expands the ‘circle of we’ at Hillel, creating new stakeholders and offering a fuller understanding of students’ lives.

Even when large, in-person communal Shabbat meals become possible again, Hillels have learned to empower students to gather for Shabbat meals on their own, create offerings for students in small groups, to embrace creative ways to mark the occasion, and keep new audiences engaged.
Hillels used Shabbat meal distribution to both meet and learn about student needs

One basic need Hillels met during Shabbat meal distribution was, simply, the practical need for a prepared meal. Hillels used the time to meet other needs as well. At many Hillels, Shabbat meal distribution was the one time during the week that Hillel staff encountered students in-person. Even though these moments were brief, thoughtful Hillels used them to provide something important for students and to learn about additional support or resources they might need.

At Texas Hillel weekly Shabbat meal distribution became a festive atmosphere with music and additional opportunities like a voter registration drive. Some students even brought their dogs. By paying attention to the user experience, Shabbat meal distribution became more than just a functional distribution of take-out meals, but a brief opportunity for students to feel like they’re part of a lively, joyful community.

Staff used their brief moment of interaction with students to learn where they would be eating their Shabbat meals. They heard that fraternity brothers who lived together would also eat together and that a student would Facetime his family back home while he ate his Shabbat meal in his apartment. Though not as detailed as a one-on-one engagement, these brief data collection moments helped staff better understand the day-to-day experience of their students in Fall 2020.

For students at Pitt Hillel, Shabbat meal distribution is a weekly reminder that they have a community and that they are cared for. Once word got out about “Shabbat to go” among the student body, sign-ups increased exponentially. This weekly moment has also become an important opportunity for staff to check on student wellness. Early in the Fall 2020 term, a therapist joined an all-staff meeting to help them identify when a student might need help. Even in a brief, masked interaction, the staff learned to tell if a student might need something more. If a student showed up alone, or wanted to talk a lot, or was crying, or was overly enthusiastic, or tried to lean over for a hug, staff would follow up with that student and offer extra support.
Appendix: Methodology

Initial data for this report came from hour-long interviews conducted with Hillel professionals over Zoom on twelve different campuses during December 2020 and early January 2021. Interviews covered a range of topics: engagement strategies for first-year students, how Hillels learned about their students, how Hillels were able to meet student needs, and how staff worked together productively and collaboratively from a distance.

Most of these campuses were identified based on HEART data from Hillel International’s measurement team. The campuses that experienced the smallest declines in depth and breadth numbers were included in the interview sample. Campus Support Directors were asked to provide names of additional campuses having success with engagement in Fall 2020. A number of different types of campuses were purposefully included in the sample, including Hillels serving large and small Jewish student populations; public and private universities; non-residential and residential campuses; campuses with greater or fewer students living at home with parents in Fall 2020; and campuses with different COVID regulations.

Once the initial four themes were identified, professionals at a handful of additional Hillels, beyond the original sample, were asked about their efforts in email and over Zoom. To learn more about the impact of ‘depth’ programs, student survey data from the Fall 2020 Jewish Learning Fellowship (JLF) were also included.

The sample of Hillels included Arizona State University Hillel, Binghamton Hillel, Buffalo Hillel, Cornell Hillel, George Washington University Hillel, Minnesota Hillel, North Texas Hillel (Dallas area), Northeastern Hillel, Oregon Hillel, Hillel JUC of Pittsburgh, Queens Hillel, Hillel of San Diego, Texas Hillel, and York College of Pennsylvania Hillel. Thank you to the dedicated professionals who volunteered their time for this project.

Dr. Daniel Olson wrote this report and conducted all of the interviews with Hillel professionals.